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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000205

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LA](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: LAO GOVERNMENT AGREES TO LET 21 HMONG GIRLS RETURN
TO THEIR FAMILIES

REF: A. VIENTIANE 0144
[1](#)B. 06 VIENTIANE 1205
[1](#)C. 06 VIENTIANE 1141

Classified By: Mary Grace McGeehan, Charge d'Affaires. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During bilateral talks in Luang Prabang on March 8, the Lao Foreign Minister told his Thai counterpart that twenty-one girls from the Petchabun settlement in Thailand had been found⁸ living with relatives in Laos and would be allowed to return to their families if they wished. The girls were part of a group of 26 Hmong children and one adult that was irregularly deported from Thailand and detained by Lao authorities in December 2005. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told us that the girls, situation will be resolved quite soon,⁸ but that some, perhaps most, will choose to stay in Laos. The fate of the five boys remains uncertain. Radio Free Asia aired a story on March 3 quoting an unidentified man as confirming that the boys are alive in northern Laos.

[1](#)2. (C) These developments suggest that, fifteen months after the children were sent out of Thailand, a resolution may finally be at hand (for the girls, at least). However, seemingly imminent solutions for this group have been derailed in the past. There appears to be consensus among foreign embassies and international organizations here that the best thing for the international community to do at this point is to keep a low profile and let the Thai-Lao process unfold. To do otherwise) e.g. to publicly question the premise that the girls were lost,⁸ to issue a public statement (even a positive one) about the situation, or to call for monitoring by international organizations here in Laos -- could jeopardize the girls, return to their families and diminish prospects for the boys, eventual release. End summary.

Girls, Return to Families Reported Imminent

[1](#)3. (C) Even before the Lao-Thai Joint Boundary Commission talks and subsequent Foreign Ministerial bilateral took place on March 8, word started circulating in Vientiane that a resolution to the case of the 21 missing Hmong girls was imminent. (The girls, along with five boys and one adult woman, were detained by Thai local authorities and sent back to Laos on December 5, 2005, where they were in turn detained by Lao authorities. The girls and the woman were eventually separated from the boys. Lao officials initially acknowledged, but later denied, that the government was holding the children.) At a March 7 reception following a European Commission) Lao government joint committee

meeting, the German ambassador made a cryptic remark to the Charge saying that we could expect good news, which seemed to be a reference to the children. The next day, the Polish charge d'affaires told the Pol/Cons officer that Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupha had said on the margins of the meeting that he felt that the children's case would soon be resolved.

¶4. (C) Soon after the March 8 bilateral, the Thai press began reporting that Lao Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith had told Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram that the children had been found.⁸ Pol/Econ Chief received an e-mail from Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Yong Chanthalangsy, sent late on March 9, saying, &Yes indeed, we had informed the Thai side that 21 girls have been located and we are willing to reunite them with their family if they wish to.⁸ The Charge notified the UNICEF representative and a staff member in the office of the United National Resident Representative; neither office had been aware of the reports.

¶5. (U) On March 13, a Thai news service carried the Thai-Lao joint communiqu  on the bilateral meeting. The section of the communiqu  titled &Hmong Issues⁸ reads as follows:

Begin text:

-- 5.1 On the case of 21 Hmong children. The Lao Government informed that it has already located 21 of them, all of whom are girls who are in good health. The Lao authority will cooperate with relevant Thai authorities in contacting the families of these children. The Thai side expressed their appreciation for the efforts that the Lao counterpart had

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made in this respect.

-- 5.2 The Lao side expressed its understanding of the situation and pressure Thailand has faced on the issue of the Hmongs. Both sides agreed to work closely together under the General Border Committee framework to find solutions to the problem.

End text.

¶6. (C) On March 12, the Charge met with French Ambassador Maurice Portiche and First Secretary Robert Sourby regarding the situation. (Comment: Ambassador Portiche, who was first stationed in Laos in the 1970,s, is one of the most astute observers of contemporary Vientiane and has very good contacts for his earlier days here. End comment.) Ambassador Portiche said that he is certain that the Hmong girls, return to their families will occur. He was not sure of the timing, but he expected things to proceed quickly. The Lao-Thai bilateral border commission would be the mechanism for the reunification. He said that it is quite possible that some girls will decide not to return to the Hmong holding camp in Petchabun, where life is very difficult. Asked if the international community could be confident that the girls, wishes were being respected, Ambassador Portiche said that he did not think the Lao would play games with the situation at this point. He noted that it was possible that the girls, parents would be able to visit them in Laos as a result of the border commission,s proceedings.

¶7. (C) On March 13, MFA spokesman Yong Chanthalangsy told Pol/Econ Chief that the girls, situation will be resolved &quite soon.⁸ He said that some, perhaps a majority, will elect to stay in Laos because they were &traumatized⁸ by the Thai police in Petchabun. Several were &extremely traumatized.⁸ Some will stay in Laos because their parents are here rather than in Petchabun. The ones whose parents are in Petchabun will be reunited with them, even if only for a short time before the repatriation of the Petchabun group

to Laos. Meanwhile, the girls have been able to call their relatives in Petchabun. (Note: The overall goal for both the Lao and Thai seems to be the closure of the Petchabun holding camp, which currently holds more than 8000 Hmong. End note.)

Need for Discretion Seen

¶18. (C) Ambassador Portiche told the Charge that it is extremely important that the girls' return to their parents be allowed to take place in a discreet way. Otherwise there would be a loss of face, especially for the Thais, who caused the situation in the first place. Any press statements or public criticism could jeopardize the boys, on whose behalf Ambassador Portiche said there will be continued efforts. The Ambassador said emphatically that he sees no role for UN representatives in Laos in the return of the children to their parents. Any attempt to try to get UNDP or UNICEF involved, he said, could derail the arrangements.

¶19. (C) The UN Resident Representative's office staff member, with whom the Charge has been consulting daily regarding the girls, situation, said that the UN also believes that outside interference could jeopardize this process and does not plan to seek a role for itself.

As For the Boys...

¶10. (C) MFA spokesman Yong told the Pol/Econ Chief during their March 13 conversation that there is no barrier to a resolution of the situation of the five boys. This will, he said, have to be done step by step. (Comment: He clearly meant that it will have to be done following the resolution of the girls, situation. End comment.) In his March 12 discussion with the Charge, Ambassador Portiche said that he expects that Lao officials will see how things develop following the return of the girls before deciding whether to return the boys as well. A March 3 Radio Free Asia story quoted an unidentified man as saying that the boys are alive in northern Laos. (Note: This was apparently done to counter rumors that one or more of the boys had died. End note.) Given reports that the boys have been held in much harsher conditions than the girls, a face-saving resolution to their situation may be harder to find.

Comment

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¶11. (C) We agree with our diplomatic colleagues about the need for caution and discretion in responding to this situation. The return of the girls (or at least some of them) to their families does seem imminent. In the past, however, seemingly promising resolutions to the children's situation have failed to materialize, often because of claimed "outside interference." We recommend that the USG take a low-profile approach as this plays out. For USG officials to do otherwise) e.g. to publicly question the premise that the girls were ever lost, to issue a public statement (even a positive one) about the situation, to call for monitoring of the girls, return by international organizations here in Laos, or to speculate publicly about the eventual resettlement to a third country -- could jeopardize the girls, return to their families and diminish prospects for the boys, release. Any press guidance on an if asked basis should focus firmly on the positive, saying that we are pleased that the girls will be allowed to join their families, we hope this happens as soon as possible, and we look forward to a positive resolution to the boys, situation as well.

MCGEAHAN